World Chronicle

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LAND MINES

TORE SKEDSMO, Senior Demining Adviser for the United Nations Department of Peace-keeping Operations, elaborates on the dangers of land mines and their economic and social impact on civilian populations. They are weapons of mass destruction, but in slow motion, and should be treated as other weapons of mass destruction, such as nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Mr. Skedsmo believes that the decision to outlaw the use of land mines depends on the political will of the leaders of the world rather than on the military. The United Nations demining programmes teach people how to remove mines as well as how to live with them, because clearing those already laid will take generations. New technology is needed to detect and destroy hundreds of millions of land mines scattered around the world.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Over the last few decades, more than 100 million mines have been planted in many countries around the world – the legacy of recent wars and local conflicts. These terrible weapons do not discriminate among military and civilian victims. In fact, they kill and maim mostly civilians, including women and children. Inexpensive and easy to plant, expensive and dangerous to remove, they have turned vast areas of the earth into wasteland. The land mine crisis has reached epidemic proportions and demands immediate attention. What can be done to rid the world of the menacing danger of these silent killers?

Our guest today is Tore Skedsmo, Senior Demining Adviser with the United Nations Department of Peace-keeping Operations. Joining me to talk with Mr. Skedsmo are Trevor Rowe of National Public Radio and Mercedes Hervas of *El Periodico* of Barcelona.
Mr. Skedsmo, welcome to World Chronicle.

SKEDSMO: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Skedsmo, while we were discussing this problem before we came on the air, you mentioned that mines were first used in the American Civil War. But I guess the purpose of mines has changed over the years, and mines have now become more an instrument of terrorism than of legitimate warfare, is that not so?

SKEDSMO: I think that's correct. It has turned out to be another aspect of mine warfare – terrorism. And most of the situations we have today are more or less civilian wars, which is internal wars, started off not as big two-front things, but groups who want to take over areas. And they keep people out by using land mines.

LITTLEJOHNS: There are rules, though, for mining. I mean, the laying of land mines and the production of land mines have not been outlawed, although efforts are being made to bring that about. But there are rules of war which govern the use of land mines, correct?

SKEDSMO: That is the Geneva Protocols. One of the weak sides of it is that these Protocols go for international conflicts and not for internal conflicts. But, as you say, there are rules: They should be marked, they should be mapped, reported, and they should be guarded. The last has been done partly by weapons, partly by people.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is the United Nations doing in this area to try and bring these things under control, to some extent?

SKEDSMO: The Secretary-General is very forceful in his aim, and UN aim, to ban all anti-personnel land mines. And there is an ongoing revision process of these Protocols. And that went on last year and it's going on this year.

ROWE: Can you walk us through this again? What is the moral case against land mines? Why are land mines bad, bombs good?

SKEDSMO: I think that the main point is the indiscriminate killing.

ROWE: Bombs are pretty indiscriminate too.

SKEDSMO: Yes, I know that, but at least you know where you drop your bomb, and you've decided to drop them on something for some purpose. Land mines normally are left in the ground to kill whosoever passes by. And statistically we guess that there's ten times more chance that they kill a civilian after the conflict than a soldier during the conflict. I think that we should move, in our minds, the land mines from the warehouse with the bombs, grenades and rifles over to the warehouse with the biological, chemical weapons, the mass destruction weapons. Because they are mass destruction weapons, just in slow motion.

ROWE: Well, how do you make the moral case then – especially at a time when the rules of war seem to be eroding, especially with the growing use of guerrilla warfare and inter-ethnic warfare – how do you make that case when people will use their fingernails to claw each other's eyes out? Why are they going to worry about land mines?

SKEDSMO: Well, as I said, if you use your fingers to get your neighbour's eyes, you know which neighbour you are attacking; but you leave the land mine in the ground and you don't know who it's attacking. That's a difference, in my opinion. And these weapons, if we may call them that, most of them are made to maim. And from my point of view, that is unnecessary suffering.

HERVAS: So, Mr. Skedsmo, is there any way that a civilian – since civilians also as well as soldiers are attacked, are hurt by these mines – is there any way that they can protect themselves? And is the UN doing anything to really train them to do it?

SKEDSMO: All these areas where we work with land mine programmes, mine awareness is a big part of it. We try to teach people how to live in an environment where there are mines around. If you go to Cambodia, you will see that in all the calendars on the school walls are mine models, all around them, in the printing. On their textbooks, there are mine signs on the textbooks to keep these things alive in their attention. And I think that is perhaps one of the most affective activities we can do, because we cannot get rid of the mines quickly enough. People have to live with them for a while.

HERVAS: I see. We just heard from our host that mines started to be used in the Civil War here in the United States. But since the UN is a much younger organization, perhaps you can tell us when did the UN begin its efforts to fight this problem, and how?

SKEDSMO: It started off in Afghanistan in 1989, I think it was, when it started a training programme for refugees who should go back to Afghanistan after what we presumed at that time should be the end of the conflict, and how they should live with and how they should get rid of the mines. That has developed into a demining programme in Afghanistan which is the most mature we have, for the time being. And it's roughly 3,000 men working there. And of these 3,000, there's only five expatriates at the time being. The programme is so mature now that the Afghans have taken over all the positions, and that is the UN intention. They have to live with this problem for a long time, and therefore you have to train them to take care of their own problems.

HERVAS: So, in broad terms, how does a demining programme function? You have a team of experts in explosives, you have a team of other kind of workers that work with the civilian population, you have a team of people who work with the local government? How do you do it?

SKEDSMO: There are some steps we have to go through. The first step is to make an assessment of the situation and find out how we want to approach it. Normally, we set up a programme which consists of a training programme to train local people to do the actual demining work, and another group who starts training instructors to do the mine awareness programme. In addition to that, we have to build up a communications system and a medical system. That is a part of the demining programme, but not too interesting in this respect, I presume. When we have trained enough people to do the actual demining, we have to start training their team leaders, their bosses, the management, and so forth and so on, so that they can build up a whole structure. A programme doesn't only consist of private deminers.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Skedsmo, in the introduction we mentioned the low cost of these terrible weapons. We have on the table here some examples of mines. This thing here, for instance, which looks like a sort of large walnut, how much would a thing like that cost?

SKEDSMO: That is a bomb, so that it comes in another category. But this one, the small –

LITTLEJOHNS: This is not really a mine?

SKEDSMO: It's not a mine. It works like a mine for the people who get hit by it, it blows like a mine, but it is a small bomb. The small green one, –

LITTLEJOHNS: This one?

SKEDSMO: Yes. This costs roughly three dollars.

LITTLEJOHNS: Really?

SKEDSMO: To produce, and you can get them secondhand for one dollar.

LITTLEJOHNS: And where was this made?

SKEDSMO: This is a Chinese –

LITTLEJOHNS: Chinese?

SKEDSMO: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: It's got a soft top.

SKEDSMO: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: And what does it contain, before it explodes?

SKEDSMO: It has 35 grams of explosives in it, and that's enough to blow off part of a foot on a grown-up man with a boot on, a foot on a child, a leg on a smaller child. It's one of these which are made to maim.

LITTLEJOHNS: But isn't that the purpose of all land mines, essentially to maim rather than to kill?

SKEDSMO: That's right. And therefore they have gone down to smaller and smaller mines. This was the former generation: 250 grams of explosive. It's not necessary; 35 grams is enough.

LITTLEJOHNS: And this large one here, what's that for?

SKEDSMO: That was popularly called a "bouncing betty", and that means that it jumps off the ground one and a half feet, and then it explodes there, and it throws out twelve hundred shrapnels around in a circle with a 30-meter diameter, and it kills everything in that area.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is the purpose of these spikes?

SKEDSMO: It can either be initiated with a trip wire mounted on this central peak, or only to tilt it. Only the spikes are above the ground, and if you hit them and you tilt this top, it detonates.

ROWE: I understand that many of these land mines can't be detected with metal detectors, that they evade detection. And I also understand that the Chinese Government has agreed to include about 8 grams of metal, of iron, in their new generation of these small land mines. How significant is that?

SKEDSMO: It's very significant, but it is wrong information.

ROWE: Oh.

SKEDSMO: There are mines which are absolutely metal-less – a very few. Personally, I've just seen two or three of them. This one is what we would call a minimum metal mine.

LITTLEJOHNS: That's got a little bit of metal on the side here.

SKEDSMO: No, that is the safety pin. We take that one off. But it has a pin, a small pin in the middle of a glass fibre spring, and that is its only metal. It's 0.6 grams of

metal. And 0.6 grams is so little that before we find this mine we have found all the shrapnel in the area and we have also found the iron ore in the soil, because my metal detector cannot discriminate between the iron oil in the soil and this amount. So what happened was that in preparation for the meeting in Vienna most countries agreed that it should be a minimum amount of metal, and 8 grams was mentioned, so that we could use our metal detectors to find it. At the meeting, a number of countries left that point of view, and did not reach an agreement on it.

ROWE: Okay. So they haven't agreed. Well, I'd like to ask you about that, to explore that a bit further, because you have a number of countries that have been actively promoting a ban on the export of land mines. But these same countries – and one of them is the United States – these same countries continue to manufacture land mines. And I'm just wondering what kind of signal that sends about the seriousness with which the international community is approaching the land mine issue.

SKEDSMO: It's a difficult problem. I think that we reached a certain step towards the ban of land mines by stopping their export. I'm sure that that is one step to do it. How serious people are about it depends on the situation and how to define it. And I have the feeling that there is a lot of good traditional military thinking that we need them. And that's why they still go on using them. I would like a number of officers, experienced officers, to step forward and tell about their experience with land mines. A high-ranking American marine officer says that he's never seen a mine field working as presumed. But still, they believe in it. The decision-makers in the political role learned the lesson a long time ago, and they stick to that form.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Tore Skedsmo, Senior Demining Advisor with the United Nations Department of Peace-keeping Operations.

HERVAS: Mr. Skedsmo, according to UN data, many more mines are being laid every year than the ones that you are able to remove, or the Governments are able to remove. And also it's been said that – I think you said it, our host – that we would need about a thousand years to be completely rid of all of them. Do you think that's a very pessimistic assessment?

SKEDSMO: I hope th. t a thousand years is a pessimistic assessment. I'm sure that there are going to be mines around for generations. But we have to accept as well that a lot of countries are living perfectly – perfect is a relative term – well by having land mines some places. We have to have a priority here, to clear the lands which are used first, and then go further and further out. You have to understand that we still, in Western Europe, have accidents every year – the figure 20 to 50 has been mentioned – from land mines left from first and second world wars. We don't get rid of all of them, but to say that we have to

live with them, yes, we have to, we have to find our way of living with them. We need new technology. We are working on 1942 technology, approximately, and that is not good enough. And why do we do that? The reason is simple. A lot of money is put into research for how armies should deal with land mines, but that's a totally different aspect. They only need to get through the mine field, make a road, make a track, make something. And they know it's dangerous to fight a war. But we have to clear the land. We cannot tell the local farmers that, hey, we have cleared your land, but the bad news is that we probably left 10 per cent of them.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are there still mines lying around from the American Civil War?

SKEDSMO: No. Not that I know of. And I don't think that the mines at that time had such a form and consistence that it lasted that long.

LITTLEJOHNS: You know, Mr. Skedsmo, we talk about – well, the United Nations and various conferences are talking about outlawing the production and the use of land mines. But when you've got this huge number of mines in various parts of the world, particularly in countries that have experienced civil wars, as you mentioned a while ago, I mean, even if you outlaw them, it's not going to make much difference, is it? People are still going to be losing their limbs and having their heads blown off in many parts of the world, even if you stop the flow of mines.

SKEDSMO: That's correct. But I don't see that that is a moral point of view. We cannot just add –

LITTLEJOHNS: It's a practical point of view.

SKEDSMO: I agree. What we have to do is to get the new laying stopped so we can know which programme we have to deal with instead of losing the battle by someone putting more mines in that variable.

LITTLEJOHNS: So that it'll take only a thousand years and not two thousand.

SKEDSMO: For example.

LITTLEJOHNS: To get rid of them.

SKEDSMO: For example.

ROWE: Well, speaking of the international resolve to eliminate this problem, if it was to be measured in money terms, what do you make of the fact that so far you have what is called a voluntary trust fund for assistance in mine clearance and so far only $22 million has been received? I shouldn't say "so far only". $22 million was received. Is that sufficient? Or what does that tell us about the international will to deal with the problem?

SKEDSMO: $22 million is a lot of money, and the trust fund was supposed to be a start-up fund, and we can start a number of activities for $22 million. We also have donors who tell us that if you put up a programme there and there and so and so, we can come with

more money. But they want to have a concrete programme. A lot of countries and international organizations are not able to donate money to a trust fund which is not dedicated to a certain programme in a certain country. So I think $22 million is a good start.

ROWE: Okay. Also looking at the money issue, the UN has called for new technologies to be developed, cost-efficient technologies, but this would involve research and whatnot. And I'm just wondering, what is the economic incentive here to develop these new technologies?

SKEDSMO: The economic incentive is the market.

ROWE: And where is this market, and –

SKEDSMO: It's 60 countries out there which have this problem, 36 of them severe problems. And we know that this demining is going to go on for another generation or two. And somebody – the one who comes up with good equipment has the market.

HERVAS: Mr. Skedsmo, it seems to me that the land mine crisis is mostly a political crisis, since you have told us that many military think that they have a use – I mean, for warfare. Now, we have now a big peace-keeping force, a big international peace-keeping force in Bosnia, which is one of the places where more mines are being laid, have been laid. So do you think that if some accident happened, if some casualties suffer as a result of these mines, it could generate a state of opinion that could pressure the politicians around the world now to do something?

SKEDSMO: I'm absolutely convinced that that is the sad truth. I think that we, in America, have seen the interest in land mines increasing tremendously just the last few months, since it was decided that American troops would go into Bosnia. And the cover of the one soldier who was hurt in the first accident put a new pressure on the media. For us who know that we have an accident approximately ever 15 minutes every day around the world, it's perhaps somewhat sarcastic, but it is somewhat strange to discover what this one person has created through media attention compared with all the others dying all the time. And if you go to UNPROFOR, land mines were the main accident and killing reason in UNPROFOR in ex-Yugoslavia, and is already in IFOR –

LITTLEJOHNS: The UN force in the former Yugoslavia.

SKEDSMO: That's right. And it's already been 12 accidents in the new IFOR, the so-called NATO –

LITTLEJOHNS: From mines?

SKEDSMO: From mines.

LITTLEJOHNS: Really.

HERVAS: So in a way any accident will give you a big weapon even to ask for more funds for your efforts.

SKEDSMO: Yes. It's not a nice thought, but I think that's correct. Always when I talk in America about these things, I say for fun that I would like to have a minefield on Third Avenue so we can explain what this is about. Now we got in the media instead.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Skedsmo, a couple of questions. Which countries are worst affected by land mines? I mean, which countries have the largest numbers of land mines, and which countries are the biggest producers of these weapons?

SKEDSMO: The first question is the easiest to answer. Angola, Afghanistan, Cambodia, perhaps Mozambique comes, perhaps Bosnia or Croatia comes at number four place. But those are the main ones. China is a good producer, big producer. There's a number of producers in Asia, a number of producers in the former Warsaw Pact, but there's also producers in Western Europe and in America.

LITTLEJOHNS: The United States still produces?

SKEDSMO: As far as I know, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mrs. Ogata, instituted a programme whereby UNHCR does not sign contracts with companies where there's evidence that they produce mines. This is a type of boycott. Do you think this is something that the United Nations might usefully make more widespread?

SKEDSMO: I think that is one way of getting public attention and public awareness, and as such I think is a good step forward. And the Department of Humanitarian Affairs is coordinating a similar activity for other parts of the UN system as well.

ROWE: We've talked about the moral case against land mines. How would you convince military leaders? What is the military case against land mines? How would you go to a general and say this is the reason why you shouldn't use land mines?

SKEDSMO: I think that we have to try to convince him of two things. The first thing is that there is a lot of evidence that it doesn't work according to the book. And the other thing is that even in most cases there is a life after the war, and there has to be a connection between the cost of the war and the result afterwards.

ROWE: Have you tried this? And what was the result?

SKEDSMO: We have tried it, and we have not been too successful. But it is a growing opinion also on that side, there's more military people willing to discuss it now than there had been before. But I don't think that it is the military who is going to decide these things. I think the military in most democratic countries is the tool of the Government, and we have had changes of policies due to pressure from the public in Europe the last year, and I cannot see why that shouldn't happen again.

HERVAS: So, assuming that there is a war against land mines, how could you – briefly tell us, how could it be won?

SKEDSMO: I think that the main step, the main step is public awareness, and to manage to move in people's minds the land mine from the warehouse with the guns, the pistols and the rifles over to the warehouse with chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. Most people today don't want nuclear weapons, they don't want biological weapons, they don't want chemical weapons, because they're mass destruction weapons. Land mines are also mass destruction weapons. They kill and maim all over the world indiscriminately. They do it slower than some of the others, yes, but they still go on, and are going to go on, killing people for years, generations.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is the main problem about dismantling and removing mines? Is it so expensive because it's very time consuming? Or is it because of lack of information about the precise location of these mines, particularly in countries that have experienced civil war? What are the problems? Why is it so expensive? Why can a weapon which costs a dollar secondhand cost maybe a thousand dollars or more to remove?

SKEDSMO: If you take three $3 mines and put them into Central Park and don't tell anyone where they are, what do you think it would cost UN police force to find them? That's the problem. We don't know where they are, and they'll maim or kill you, so therefore you have to establish a medical system, including often a communications system, and you have to start looking for them. To detonate or to dismantle – we detonate mines, we don't dismantle them, we don't defuse them, we explode them. That's the safest, quickest, cheapest way to do it, in our opinion. And to destroy a mine, a simple task, no problem; to find it is a problem. And it takes us the same amount of time to clear this tabletop whether there is a mine there or not. If you find a mine, you blow it up, that's done quickly. But to go in with your bayonet or whatever to search for this one, in that area, that is what takes time.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Skedsmo, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Tore Skedsmo, Senior Demining Adviser with the United Nations Department of Peace-keeping Operations. He was interviewed by Trevor Rowe of National Public Radio and Mercedes Hervas of *El Periodico* of Barcelona.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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